

## **Initiative of Holistic Change: From Leading to Leaders**

### **How do we build a society in which we focus on perceiving capabilities and potential rather than disabilities?**

#### **Who should lead the social change?**

At Jerusalem's David Yellin Academic College of Education, a groundbreaking program has been developed that is successfully transforming lives and potentially, society. As experienced educators and visionaries of social change, we understood the limited reality of job opportunities in education for students with cognitive disabilities. In the past, it was considered a favor to be accepted for work in kindergartens. People with disabilities were not paid salaries and were assigned the most menial tasks, such as cleaning classrooms and bathrooms. We understood that a drastic change needed to happen. The cycle of perpetuating a perception of hopelessness and pity needed to end - for everyone!

Einav Mogadsi, a student at David Yellin, was the initial source of innovation. Einav, who has cognitive impairment, began as a volunteer in a kindergarten as part of her compulsory national service. Parents recognized her talent with their children and decided to hire her. However, each year was met with struggles surrounding payments and a pending decision of the Municipality to approve a salaried position. During the same period, Einav participated in a course at David Yellin entitled "Social Change in the Field of Disabilities." During the course, Einav developed the framework for a program that is now known as the *Assistants with Awareness* program. The concept was to create a program that would train individuals like herself to work as assistants to kindergarten teachers.

#### **The program**

Bloch and Sztyglic created the program, *Assistants with Awareness*, as one of the building blocks of this social transformation. The three-year program at David Yellin College has become a life-changing and society-changing force. The first two years are composed of courses on subjects that include child development, storytelling, and creative arts. There is an additional critical component to the program that addresses self-awareness. Students learn about their strengths and how to identify their need to turn for help. After three months they are hired by the municipality with the same conditions as any kindergarten assistant. If they meet approval, they continue in a second-year

internship. During this phase, students enter the classroom and learn how to work as part of a team. This includes problem-solving and arriving at implemented solutions. The third year is designed to go beyond the internship and into the realm of ongoing professional development. During this phase students also participate in the course "Social Change in the Field of Disabilities" composed of both students with disabilities and students in teacher training. The course was developed with the aim to transform the charged encounter between professionals and people with disabilities into an opportunity for social change. The student make-up reflects an underlying belief that all group members possess the ability to make significant contributions to the group learning experience. Students learn and work together, creating an engine of social change and group empowerment. The transition from the traditional stance of "learning about" to, "learning from" and "learning with" leads to the creation of initiatives in which the "led" became leaders (Bloch, Szttyglic, Sykes, 2009). This positive collective identity strengthens the students' sense of self-efficacy and greater roles in society. The class framework facilitates a deepening in students' identity and responsibility in organizational, community, social, and political contexts.

### **The process of change**

Successful meetings between students and people with disabilities require the creation of a group setting which encourages a shift in the typical mode of relations between the two groups. Buber (1923) describes the required shift as a move from "I-It" relations to "I-Thou" relations. "I-It" relations are partial relationships in which each side uses the other to fulfill his own needs, with the other serving as an object only. In "I-Thou" relations, on the other hand, whole people bring themselves into relationships as equals. Each person maintains his own separateness and uniqueness, but simultaneously joins in a process of active listening and mutual learning, becoming part of a new whole. At David Yellin this relationship increases the awareness of the commonalities between the status of these two groups.

The partnership between educators with and without formal disabilities is now accepted in Jerusalem as a mainstream occurrence. However, the process of sustainable change for students with cognitive impairment is complex and multi-faceted. At the core of this change lies the need for a fundamental transformation in the self-perception and self-belief of the student. He/she must overcome the self-exclusion built over a lifetime with the additional burden of hurdling social exclusion, stigmas, and prejudices. The process of changing the belief of "I can't" to the possibility of success is arduous yet attainable. Students eventually understand that they can learn, work, create initiatives, take responsibility, and even learn to accept constructive criticism. Bloch and

Sztyglic observe that their students are thirsty to learn. They have even noted astonishing leaps in reading and writing skills and comprehension as students have more and more positive learning experiences.

Assistant with Awareness Program Coordinator, Noga Shemesh, is highly qualified for her position, holding an M.A. in special needs. She is also hard-working, assertive, and very bright. She spells out project expectations and requirements and makes it clear that participants are entering college, not a social club. Many students enter the program accustomed to a lifetime of having exceptions made for them. The culture often gives them an easy out. In the program, even if a student chooses, for example, to attend an evening social event they are still expected to arrive at work the following day on time – no exceptions! There is no furthering of the stigma of pity. Noga explains, “Our driving motivation in this project stems from the belief that our students are capable. They work like everyone else in the kindergarten, they get paid like everyone else, the demands are like everyone else. I think that this is the best integration possible -for them to be like everyone else.”

Bloch and Sztyglic hold that in order for the development of a new vision of society and the role of the disabled, there must be multi-level, holistic changes in the fabric of a country – in academia, in the Ministry of Education, in the municipal government, and in the community of project kindergartens. Each sector needs the courage to challenge common beliefs and practices, step out of their comfort zone, and shed dysfunctional perceptions of the role of the person with a disability. This person is an educator in every matter; their disability is both a professional advantage and a valued asset to children, community, and society. There must be a shift from compassion, charity, and pity- “they need our help”. Instead, the focus must be on the ethics of justice: this person is human and has abilities. Justice require attributes of empathy and responsibility for the other (Sagi, 2010). Bloch and Sztyglic go a step further, holding that this model reinforces the relationship of disadvantage and pity. They call for a shift in mindset in which Society views people with disabilities as partners and leaders, as an integral part of steering teams as well as being the initiators of change.

### **Shifting from “Disability → Diversability → Extrability”**

Noga was hired by Bloch and Sztyglic because of her professional skills. The fact that Noga was born with a physical disability is another example of this project's emphasis on social reframing and belief in the power of role-models. In fact, Bloch and Sztyglic have their eyes on changing our vocabulary surrounding disability. For example, the definition of *disability* focuses on what is lacking. The shift in their work has led them to coin the word *diversability*, referring to the range of abilities of a person. The highest level of change is called *extrability*, a term invented by Oleg Kolpashchikov (founder and CEO of the non-profit organization, White Cane). *Extrability* refers to exceptional skills that develop as a result of a disability. In other words, 'I wouldn't be me without this ability and it makes

me unique!' Bloch and Szttygic point to the remarkable connections the *Assistants with Awareness* make with kindergarten children. "They can understand and connect easier than adults. The kids also connect quickly, sensing that there is no judgment and only acceptance."

## **Conclusion**

After more than five years of working as a salaried employee in the same kindergarten, Einav testifies to palpable transformation, "It was my dream to see children grow up unafraid of people with differences. Today the kids see me as a member of the staff. I help them with solving problems. I relate to them. I understand them." The classroom teacher adds, "I couldn't imagine our kindergarten without Einav. We are a team! I relate to her as a human being. We have already moved far beyond focusing on integration and the importance of giving and receiving. Today, we simply understand that this is the way our kindergarten works – and it works very well!"

At the conclusion of the program, students have full rights and credentials to continue to work in the same kindergarten class and become salaried employees of the Jerusalem Municipality. A new horizon has opened for participation in the labor market through respectful and professional work. For the children in these kindergartens, there is a daily meeting that shapes and influences the child for the rest of his life and creates a normative environment where people with disabilities are a natural part. The creation and success of this program have brought about recognition and ultimately funding, within academia, the Jerusalem Municipality, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Welfare.

## **The way forward**

Bloch and Szttygic are moving forward to expand *Assistants With Awareness* to cities throughout Israel and eventually, globally. A holistic vision of change is happening. Today, participating Jerusalem kindergartens comprehend that they are partners in a revision of society. No longer do parents, educators, academia, and municipal government leaders believe that they are doing a favor for the "disabled". The revolutionary shift is in the realization that schools are more complete with the presence of David Yellin's students. A new generation of children is growing up with acceptance and respect for a new model of leadership.

## **Bibliography**

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